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WASTE IN HIGH-SCHOOL EDUCATION^{*}

IN spite of the extraordinary advance during the last few years in all that pertains to secondary education, it is undeniable that less is still accomplished than might be accomplished with the same expenditure of time and effort. In other words, there is still waste in high-school education.

Four aspects or modes of waste may be distinguished: (1) method or manner of teaching; (2) matter; (3) order of presentation; (4) aim or purpose.

The waste in method of instruction is the most obvious and widely discussed, yet every teacher knows that it is still widely prevalent. Some teachers use too many books, others too few. Some make too much use of the memory, others too little. Some talk too seldom themselves, others talk altogether too much. Time would fail for even an enumeration of the defects in instruction leading to waste in education. But there is one point, seldom mentioned, which nevertheless in my opinion deserves special attention. I refer to the radical difference in method between the eighth and ninth grades. Up to that point the methods change but little and slowly, in the main not at all. The pupil studies and recites all his lessons in one room, to one teacher, with the same surroundings and the same classmates. The school therefore becomes a second home, and the intimate personal contact results in direct and fruitful influence of personality upon personality. But the moment he enters the high school all is changed, and the larger the school the greater is the change. The pupil is now lost in the multitude. He studies in a room whose occupants are constantly changing, he recites to four or five teachers whom he scarcely sees except in class, he goes from room to room, finding in each a multitude of new faces; in all this busy, hurrying throng of pupils and teachers there is seldom anyone to whom he feels free to unbosom

^{*} A paper read before the Minnesota Educational Association.

himself, anyone who has a vital personal interest in him and to whom he feels a direct personal responsibility. In a word, he is thrown entirely upon his own resources, without a word of warning or of preparation. Is it any wonder that the percentage of mortality, so to speak, in the first year of high school is alarmingly great? That boy spoke better than he knew who, on being asked why he did not get along better in high school, replied that he "couldn't get the hang of the schoolhouse." Could anything more pathetic be imagined? A system which through the lack of adjustment between grammar school and high school gives rise to such a condition of affairs is assuredly a prolific source of educational waste.

Matter and order of study together constitute the question of "course of study," which has of late years been the subject of such extended and fruitful discussion. Here again time would be lacking merely to name the ways in which waste occurs through the irrational choice of subjects and the illogical and unpedagogical order of treatment. Almost any course of study, even the best, would offer examples to the point. Hitherto, one of the chief causes of this condition has been the fearful and wonderful variety of entrance requirements which the colleges have maintained and sought to impose on the schools. To all appearances, it has been a race between them to see which could invent the most impossible set of requirements; the winner in this contest being esteemed the most advanced and exclusive institution. But the agitation for uniform college entrance requirements is proof that the greatness of the resulting evil is working its own cure; and the high schools may now hope for the gradual removal of the obstructions which the colleges have offered to the formation of a rational high-school curriculum. The University of Minnesota is to be congratulated on having taken, in the recent revision of its requirements, the longest step in this direction which has yet been made by any American university, excepting only Harvard. In at least one respect, however, I believe there is still room for improvement. I am one of those who believe that the retention as an absolute requirement of the so-called "higher algebra," which in practice

is very seldom anything of the sort, costs a great deal more in derangement of the curriculum than it is worth.

But the main responsibility for the waste resulting from unwise choice of matter and order must nevertheless be borne by the high schools. Comforting as it would be, it cannot be shifted to the colleges. The force of tradition is mighty, human inertia is great; it is so much easier to copy thoughtlessly some previous course, with trifling changes in details to suit local conditions or individual fancy, than to make a new course on some rational plan. And the confusion always resulting where some rank educational empiric has illustrated anew the ancient proverb about fools and angels, has tended to confirm the majority in the conviction that the beaten track is the way of safety. Thus conditions have, on the whole, changed very slowly and not always for the better. When high schools were first established there was one course for all alike: to this bed of Procrustes all must be fitted, at whatever sacrifice of their natural abilities. Later the pendulum swung to the other extreme, and courses multiplied until it seemed that high schools prided themselves as much on the number and peculiarity of their courses as the colleges on their entrance requirements. In both cases the pride felt in such matters appeared to vary in inverse ratio to the size of the school. Instances have been known of a school of less than two hundred pupils maintaining from six to twenty different courses; and it is believed that such schools still exist, though of course not in Minnesota.

The waste resulting from such an arrangement is only less—if indeed it be less—than that resulting from the single ironclad course. Of all the forms of educational waste, all teachers will surely agree that the most harassing and hopeless is that of trying to pound subjects into the heads of pupils who can never in this world be brought to comprehend them. Is it not so? Yet wherein does the multiple course system offer any relief? The true remedy is not optional courses, but optional studies. The introduction of a single general course, with a few studies required and the rest optional may, in my opinion, be justified on the following grounds:

1. That an appeal to the assumed ability of school authorities to choose more wisely than the pupils logically requires the establishment of a single ironclad course for all pupils, an obvious *reductio ad absurdum*.

2. That the establishment of several inflexible courses, between which pupils are to choose, once for all, abandons completely the theory of benevolent despotism, and substitutes the optional principle in its most injurious and indefensible form; in that, namely, in which the youth of the pupil and the irrevocable nature of the decision combine to produce the maximum number of fatal mistakes, and consequently of ruined careers.

3. That the attempt to escape these consequences by allowing a change of course and the substitution of studies, as now generally practiced, leads to a condition of utter chaos; and that this result cannot be avoided so long as the value-in-exchange of the several studies, and the selection of those which are indispensable, depend upon nothing more permanent or tangible than the private opinion of the temporary principal.

4. That the only way of insuring that each graduate, and each pupil, so far as he goes, shall have taken a consistent, well rounded course, is therefore to authorize, and at the same time to limit, the substitution of studies on a definite credit basis, in such a manner that whatever choice the pupil makes, he cannot construct for himself a scrappy, unrelated course.

Finally, it is obvious that both the manner and matter of education are largely determined by the aim; and in the predominant aim of education today is involved a waste greater than all the other aspects combined. The schools, the last refuge of discredited philosophies, are still dominated by the extreme individualism of the last century, which regarded the individual as the center of the universe and the object and end of creation. This philosophy has been weighed in the balance and found wanting long years ago in all other departments of thought. In economics and politics the *laissez faire* theory has long since passed to the limbo of doctrinaire inventions. Depravity in the home, dishonesty in business, corruption in politics, are all a most impressive warning that the individual

has been petted and pampered until he feels no sense of obligation to God or man. Public spirited citizens are moved to form civic leagues to combat the reign of unbridled selfishness. And yet in the face of all this the schools go on educating youth with a view not to the good of society, but to the advantage of the individual. Schools cannot be rightfully maintained out of public taxation merely to give an additional start in life to those already endowed by nature with exceptional advantages. We need to hear less of the rights of the individual and more of his duties, less of individual liberty and more of social solidarity. As Fouillée has pointed out: "The danger that, above all others, a democratic nation must avoid is the disintegration of society into units with no immediate concern but self-interest, into individuals to whom social duties and bonds are gradually ceasing to appeal." Aristotle assures us that "man is by nature a social animal;" and a greater than Aristotle has taught that "we are all members one of another," and that "none of us liveth unto himself;" shall we not at last cease to go contrary to this primary truth in our education? If this most fundamental and disastrous waste in education is to end, there must be more emphasis on the social sciences throughout the schools, and especially in the high school; an emphasis which shall appear not only, nor chiefly, in the introduction of new subjects, but in the handling of all subjects with reference to their bearing on social welfare. The imperative need of the age is the *socialization of education*.

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